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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000110

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS (BESTIC), PRM/FO (DAS GREENE),
PRM/ANE (ALBRIGHT), DRL/AWH (ORONA), AND IO/FO (DAS WARLICK
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SUBJECT: DIPLOMATIC TOUR OF RESETTLED HMONG; WHERE ARE ALL
THE REFUGEES?

REF: A. 06 VIENTIANE 1205

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 816

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: An MFA-led February 8 tour of one Hmong area near Vientiane proved little about the situation of resettled Hmong in Laos -- especially former insurgents. Only one family of five from the group of 52 economic migrants had been returned to the well-to-do area visited. However the MFA tour may be the beginning of a very long process toward the Government of Laos (GOL) allowing some sort of international monitoring. Our next priority: pushing MFA to set up a promised next trip -- to Bolikhamxai Province, long mute on Hmong issues including surrenders, resettlements, and the fate of the group of 16 Hmong former insurgents just pushed back from Thailand in early January. Meanwhile, MFA continues to plan for the return of the 153 Hmong from Nong Khai despite the embarrassing failure of the January 30 attempted pushback. At the same time, the international community moves forward with plans to resettle this group and other Hmong with Australia leading the way by promising to take 200 of the 441 referred recently by UNHCR. And in the background, one analyst points out, are radical Hmong Americans who will use either a pushback of the 153 or successful resettlement to generate headlines and enhance fundraising activities. End summary.

The Village Visit

[1](#)2. (SBU) Pol/Econ Chief participated in a high-profile MFA-led visit February 8 for Vientiane-based diplomats and journalists to Kilometer 52, an area near Vientiane with a high concentration of well-to-do ethnic Hmong. The visit, promised during MFA Press DG Yong's February 1 press conference on the attempt to push back 153 Hmong from Nong Khai, actually only produced one returnee family from Thailand: of the 52 pushed back across the border in November (ref A), only 8 were sent here -- a couple with three children originally from a local village plus their three nephews. The nephews' relatives later appeared to take the nephews back to their home village, leaving only the family of five remaining here.

13. (U) The diplomatic group met with 100 local villagers led by village chief Siphandone who specified Kilometer 52 is actually a collection of eleven villages with close to 16,000 people. Of the population, 58 percent are ethnic Hmong or other "Lao Sung;" 5% are Khmu; and 37% are lowland Lao. Eighty percent of the villagers are farmers, growing rice and raising livestock with some new rubber plantings. The presence of multiple Western Union offices indicated one reason why this area is well-to-do: remittances from relatives overseas.

14. (SBU) The parents from the family of five -- who appeared to have little education -- told the group they decided to leave the village because they lacked sufficient good-quality farmland. Their absence was short-lived: they left their village in September 2006, were detained soon thereafter in Thailand, and then were held for two months before being sent back. They had paid a trafficker Baht 3000 (\$87) per person to be taken to Thailand. Since the family was gone for such a short period, returning to the village and settling back in was not difficult. The father said that conditions at the Nong Khai Immigrant Detention Center (IDC) had been very bad; there was not enough food; and there had been "pain" -- which he did not define.

15. (C) Since this visit focused on just the group of returned economic migrants rather than more sensitive returnees, the Kilometer 52 visit appeared at best a tentative step toward monitoring. Participants attempted to make clear that joining the visit did not indicate international acceptance of the GOL version of internal tranquillity in Laos. MFA has promised a future trip to Bolikhamxai Province where a group of 16 Hmong, apparently from the Yang Wangmeng insurgent

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group, pushed back from Thailand in January have been sent. The Bolikhamxai visit, announced in a diplomatic note along with the Kilometer 52 visit, had to be postponed, according to DG Yong, because it would need more extensive preparations including an overnight stay in Pakxan. E/P Chief took the opportunity of a subsequent lunch to push DG Yong strongly on setting up the Bolikhamxai trip as soon as possible.

Planning for the 152

16. (C) DG Yong told a German poloff during the Kilometer 52 visit that he had been given authority via Prime Minister's Decrees to clear land and install roads for a new settlement for 300 people in northern Vientiane Province including authority to purchase six tractors for this project. He clarified to E/P Chief in their subsequent lunch that this 300-person settlement was designed to resettle the 152 (153 with a new baby) Hmong currently in the Nong Khai Immigration Detention Center. When asked why space for 300, DG Yong clarified that the GOL does not want any "mono-ethnic" settlements at this point, so the 152 would be resettled with people from other ethnic groups. Asked why this group would not be split up and sent back to home provinces as had been done with the 52 economic migrants, Yong responded that this group did not have homes to return to, so a new settlement area had to be set up for its members.

Assessing The Kilometer 52 Visit

17. (C) The "like-minded" diplomatic group met February 9 to exchange views on the village visit and next steps. One point of agreement: the promised visit to Bolikhamxai Province would be very important. Meeting with one family from the group of 52 pushed back in November was not controversial since this group of economic migrants had no connections to the insurgency. The group of 16 pushed back to Bolikhamxai in January clearly had insurgency links. Moreover, Bolikhamxai is one of the most closed provinces, releasing no information about any of the groups of insurgents that have surrendered there (ref A). The group

considered the Kilometer 52 village visit as a first step -- and a relatively difficult step -- for MFA in trying to become more transparent, a process with which the Government of Laos (GOL) lacks experience and has a long way to go. The message that this group had returned and had not been harassed -- the point was clear that only traffickers, not economic migrants, would be punished -- appeared designed to help dry up the flow of economic migrants to Thailand.

¶8. (C) Summing up his views for the group, Australian Ambassador Maclean noted that, during the past year, the GOL for the first time has acknowledged that Hmong in Thailand, including in the Petchabun camp, are from Laos -- a significant political development. Moreover, the GOL has made a great deal of progress with the Thai Government toward reaching agreement on their return. This agreement of course is at variance with the Thai Government's international obligations. The attempted January 30 pushback of the 152 Hmong from Nong Khai represented a major bilateral commitment as can be seen by the formal ceremonies held at Nong Khai City Hall by representatives of the two governments; the failure of the push back was a tremendous loss of face, particularly for the Thai side. In essence, the GOL has "boxed in" the Thais with the bilateral agreement to return the Hmong despite the Thais' international obligations.

¶9. (C) Ambassador Maclean also noted a spurt of renewed UNHCR referrals for resettlement. Before screening was suspended in early February, the UNHCR had referred 441 Hmong for third country resettlement. These are not Hmong from the camp in Petchabun; these are Lao Hmong who have gotten to Bangkok, other locations, and those at the Nong Khai Immigration Detention Center. Australia plans to accept as many as 200 -- processing the first group next week. Of the 200, 26 are from the Nong Khai group of 152; these 26 are receiving final medical clearances. (Note: UNHCR has also informed Embassy Bangkok (ref B) that the Netherlands plans to accept a further 22 from the group of 152.)

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¶10. (C) Ambassador Maclean suggested the like-minded group might stress to GOL officials that real international monitoring would be in the GOL's own interests. Now the UNHCR has to accept the version of events being told by a person seeking refugee determination since UNHCR is not allowed to be present in Laos to do its own assessment. A durable monitoring system would decrease the numbers of applicants being given political refugee status. For instance, the bulk of the Hmong at the holding camp in Petchabun are most likely economic migrants with perhaps no more than 4% real refugees.

¶11. (C) The group agreed that pushing the GOL directly on this issue is not likely to be productive; GOL officials do not react well when others push them. ASEAN may also be able to help at some point; the ASEAN Summit recently held in Cebu identified migration as a major issue. Another avenue in the future might be to ask for Vietnam to help since Vietnam now accepts some international monitoring of its upland minorities. So far, Vietnam has not been willing to "interfere" in Lao internal events. UNDP Country Representative Sonam Rana noted that UNHCR is trying to restore its relations with the GOL; she has been telling GOL officials that having the UNHCR in Laos is in the GOL's own interests. In their lunch, E/P Chief prodded DG Yong on this issue, countering Yong's argument that the GOL does not want to "internationalize" the Hmong issue through accepting outside monitoring by pointing out the issue is obviously internationalized already with Hmong in Thailand and being accepted for resettlement abroad by a range of countries.

One Analyst's View

¶12. (C) Regarding the attempt January 30 to push back the 153

from Nong Khai, one analyst noted most Hmong American groups have been very quiet possibly because of rivalries among Hmong factions. The two main leaders in the group of 153, Blia Shoua Her and Chong Lee Lor, and the activist supporting them have long been at odds with the more radical Hmong-American groups. These latter groups may actually see advantages of the pushback happening in terms of headlines and enhanced fundraising opportunities. Of course, if the 153 are granted asylum and overseas resettlement, these groups will also claim credit and use this to enhance fundraising as well. In terms of the larger Hmong group in Petchabun, this analyst estimates that less than 15% are legitimate refugees, although the radical Hmong American groups insist that all are refugees.

Comment

¶13. (C) Accepting the MFA invitation to tour a Hmong area that has little to do with the insurgency to meet with recently returned economic migrants was something of a gamble for the diplomats who participated. On one side was the possibility of Lao headlines that "Diplomats Support Lao Efforts." Indeed the Vientiane Times and Lao Patthana newspapers had articles the day after the visit saying: "Hmong 'returned' by Thai authorities 'happy' to be back in Laos" where they can "have their own homes and can educate their children." On the other side was trying to find a way to work with MFA to create an opportunity for meaningful monitoring sometime in the future. The latter seemed a bit more likely since the original MFA invitation was for trips to both the Kilometer 52 area near Vientiane and more distant Bolikhamxai Province. We are disappointed the GOL has postponed the latter trip and will continue to push for this energetically. We will also maintain the dialogue with our like-minded colleagues to push for some sort of outside monitoring either via a UNHCR return to Laos or possibly an ASEAN approach. Meanwhile, we remain wary about the fate of the 153 in Nong Khai as well as the larger group in Petchabun.
HASLACH